

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Speaking With One Voice”

The discussion that took place at the latest meeting of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board covered all of the main issues facing Bosnia and Herzegovina – thoroughly and candidly – and by Tuesday afternoon there was a clear and unanimous view of what must now be done to move this country out of political deadlock and back on the road to Europe.

My objective during the past six months has been to identify the causes of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s current crisis and work to forge a consensus in the international community on how to respond to it effectively. Such a consensus emerged from this week’s meeting.

I am obliged to point out, however, that the progress that was made was not the result of the constructive engagement of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Presidency at the meeting. There was not one contribution, but three separate and contradictory contributions.

The Declaration issued by the Steering Board represents a much-needed reality check. The reality is this: more than a year has been squandered as a handful of politicians have reverted to name-calling political fantasy, in the process abandoning constructive debate and effective policy-making. This has meant that Bosnia and Herzegovina has slipped behind its neighbours in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration, which is the overriding aspiration of the population.

The international community understands what has happened and will not abandon the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the whims of a small number of politicians. The meeting of the PIC Steering Board made real progress in charting a way forward, and it held out the prospect of a rapid improvement in the situation, if the deadlock can be broken in core areas.

I have been engaged in the affairs of this country for a decade and a half and have seen time and again how – with a little discipline and good will – contradictory positions can be reconciled and a joint position can be adopted for the common good.

This discipline and good will is currently lacking in the Presidency. This institution – which should represent and speak on behalf of the entire population of this country – came to the Steering Board meeting in disarray, its three members presenting positions that were totally incompatible with one another.

They did this in front of the entire international community, which had gathered to review ways to help this country more effectively. In this way, they provided the best possible illustration of the wisdom of the earlier PIC decision to keep the Office of the High Representative open and the need to retain Bonn Powers.

I have seen bickering mayors and municipal officials resolve their differences. I cannot believe that Zeljko Komsic, Haris Silajdzic and Nebojsa Radmanovic cannot resolve theirs too. These are experienced politicians who exercise real authority. This should make it easier, not more difficult, for them to serve the people who made them the foremost representatives of the country.

The Presidency has a responsibility to articulate common cause and collective solutions – this is not its prerogative, it is its obligation. When they take their seats on the Presidency, the three members cease to have the status of mere party politicians – their duties are wider and deeper than that, and this week the three members of the Presidency failed to discharge those duties in a manner compatible with their office.

The Presidency’s failure to present any kind of united front helped forge as great unanimity as I have ever seen at an international meeting. Unlike the Presidency, the PIC Steering Board – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the European Commission – came out of Monday and Tuesday’s discussions speaking clearly and with one voice.

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